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Michael Rydman
Grand Valley State University

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The Enduring Appeal of Vampires

MICHAEL RYDMAN

Moving with cat-like grace he steps from a moonlit alley into a flood of neon lights. Only his piercing eyes might set him apart from the others on the street. Having traded in his flowing cape for a steel-gray London Fog suburban coat, he prowls the modern streets with self-assurance.

No creature of the night seems to excite the western imagination quite like the vampire. While others like Frankenstein and the Mummy have lost their luster over the years, vampires abound in books and films. In the local video store the horror shelves are stocked with films like *The Lost Boys*, and posters proclaim the release of *Fright Night II*. With the original *Dracula* to *Interview with a Vampire* at the local bookstore, vampires appear to be more than a passing fad. The key to this appeal is complex. An examination of our fascination with vampires leads inexorably into the shadowy conflicts and tensions so much a part of our human condition.

I do not intend to delve deeply into the origins of the vampire here; suffice to say that they are very old, possibly prevalent long before their appearance in Slavic folklore of the early Middle Ages (Wuttke 149). These legends saw vampires as maleficent sprites—amorphous spirits with evil intentions. Since these dangerous spirits were believed to be afraid of fire, the wary shepherd took care to keep a fire burning nearby just in case.

While the legend itself undoubtedly caught the imagination of people from early times, it was not until Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula* that the vampire captured a larger audience. Dracula as a concrete personality gave focus to the ancient legend. Unlike the earlier nameless sprites, Dracula could be seen, heard, feared, and even admired – especially by those readers who were unfettered by moral misgivings. Many aspects of Dracula excited the imaginative reader. He was suave, handsome, and cultured. He had old world charm, wealth, and undeniable sex appeal. In fact, he might have been the sort of date you could bring home to meet the folks if not for his tragic flaw. Overall, there had never before been a character with so many striking traits; the sheer force of his personality filled the pages of Bram Stoker's short novel.

In part, it was this fascinating combination of contrasting traits that piqued the reader's interest. Yet there is far more behind the appeal of the vampire than merely Dracula's engaging personality. The salient reason that vampires hold a lasting appeal is that they allow readers to circumvent four primary psychological tensions. These center in four areas: 1) sexuality, 2) mortality, 3) the battle of Christianity, and

4) the lure of the occult. Readers can indulge their unconscious desires in these areas without directly challenging the moral precepts that hold these desires in counterpoise.

Sexuality

The primary tension is between sexual license and sexual repression. We can see that Dracula's ladies were pretty sexy for their time. "The fair woman came close and bent over him until he could feel her breath upon him. In a way, it was sweet, but under the sweetness was the bitter smell of blood" (Stoker). Here the sexual attraction and moral aversion serve as a metaphor for the psychological tension between desire and culturally nurtured inhibitions. Further, three sexual practices which are often outwardly discouraged in our western culture are hinted at.

The first practice involves the bisexual impulse exhibited by vampires. Even from the earliest treatments of the vampire in literature this tendency has played an important role in the sexual nature of the *undead*. A second practice stems from the vampire's need for excessive exogamy. Since the vampire's partner is human, the sexuality represented here is more than interracial. It is a sexual relationship between human being and spiritual creature of the night. The final practice of vampire sexuality involves its oral nature. This connection to human sexual practice is probably apparent here without further comment. We might recall the discovery of Levi-Strauss that many primitive cultures use the same word for sexual intercourse and eating (Stevenson 142).

Our western culture's xenophobic tendency, and its overall sexual inhibition directly contrast with the sexual liberty represented in the world of the vampire.

Mortality

A second major tension exists between the perceived natural order and the unnatural order presented by the *undead*. The natural order is represented by the cycle of life and death. Vampires live in a shadowy world that transcends this cycle — unless of course they become careless and are destroyed by their antagonists.

Few desires are as enduring as the wish for immortality. Vampires offer the reader a glimpse of this god-like attribute. Imagine living through countless generations in perfect health. You might have known Wellington personally, or sat in court as Mozart conducted his divertimenti. You might have traded letters with Benjamin Franklin or stories with Gertrude Stein. You could plan to experience events twenty generations from now. While these thoughts contradict the natural world, fiction creates its own world with its own rules. We find in vampires a sense of immortality, and the fantasy has a deep appeal for many.

The Battle of Christianity

Of course the dominant tension between the natural and unnatural order for our western culture is represented by the struggle of Christianity against the powers of darkness. Vampire legends stand in direct opposition to Christianity but build on Christian symbolism. Not since the time of Milton's Satan has a creature of darkness come to life with the force and vitality of Dracula, and the vampires that followed continue in his tradition.

In the apocryphal battle that inevitably follows, the Christian forces, representing the natural order, have a number of weapons in their arsenal. They have the cross, which works both as talisman and as stake to sanctify the earth into which it is driven; even the earthen body of vampires can be reduced to lifeless dust by using the stake in this second manner. Additionally, they have the power of the sun and its light to defeat the *undead.* This light can be seen as the light of Christianity that can banish any hint of darkness through its illumination. The Christian forces also have holy water in addition to their faith to combat these creatures of the night. (Garlic is one of the few banes to vampires not directly traceable to Christian tradition.)

In counterpoise, the forces of the unnatural have the cover of night and darkness. In opposition to the Christian tradition, they make human blood their own inverted Eucharist. Also contrasting to the Christian tradition, the power of transubstantiation lies within the vampire's inner nature rather than in the blood itself. Vampires also have the ability to change forms at will, and they have physical strength to match the spiritual strength of the devout. As a representative of evil, the vampire is a serious challenge to the heroes – so serious that the reader is never quite certain until the end who will come out on top. The archetypal battle between the forces of light and darkness exerts a strong fascination on many readers.

The Lure of the Occult

Finally, the vampire story presents the psychological tension between the rational mind and the irrational: between senseless metaphysical beliefs on the one hand, and the rational brain activities of science, logic, and reason on the other.

There is power in science. It was changing the face of our world when Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula*, and the rate of change has grown steadily since then. It is natural to feel some uneasiness about this power and the changes it has wrought, as well as to romanticize the past. Even many non-romantics see our modern world, where science is wedded to and controlled in part by our irrational impulses, as a questionable bargain. Vampires play on these misgivings. Vampires represent the power of the supernatural over the forces of science. They stand for the power of the occult over our more rational impulses. As we project our inner psychologies onto the outer world, the vampire becomes the enemy, representing all those negative qualities we cannot face up to in ourselves. They are our own archetypal

shadows.

Because this pattern is such a common theme in horror, it is easy to underestimate its power. To get some sense of its ability to engulf the imagination, try to recall a time when you were afraid of the irrational. Perhaps you can recall the tense muscles and shallowness of breath during an especially vivid ghost story — when you were afraid to look behind you, and even moderate sounds made you jump. Life seemed intense at those moments. Some of that intensity is captured in the world of the vampire.

It's the intensity of cool autumn nights in Paris when the air is too calm to chase away the smell of tobacco from the entrance to the nightspots, and the soft music spills out into the streets. A bat descends from above the gas lamp, alights, and changes in an instant. She senses the atmosphere inside and makes her way calmly with all of the time in the world. As she steps inside, she puts on her dark glasses, and she expertly scans the customers with a polished, unrevealing half-smile. This is the world of intrigue and mystery. It is horror's answer to the spy novel. But, unlike the formula novel, the literature of vampires is evolving.

Vampires Today

A modern trend in the world of vampires is the novel where the *undead* narrate their own stories. Few other evil creatures achieve this sort of following. One factor that has aided in this transformation is the erosion of much of the previous Christian symbolism regarding the vampire. While the modern vampire is still evil, those Christian weapons which proved the vampire's undoing in previous novels are now often ineffectual. This ignorance of the traditional weapons also makes it easier for a modern reader to identify with the vampire without directly challenging the Christian tradition. The life stories of modern day vampires— judging from book sales of Anne Rice — are currently pretty popular. Although she is a more than competent writer, her subject matter at least as much as her narrative gift has increased the sale of her novels of the *undead*.

While identification with characters like Dracula has always had an appeal, this contemporaneity is a new twist on the old legend. Certainly the elegance of vampires helps to draw the reader into their world. Those who feel as if they are somehow different from others might also find a kindred spirit in the *undead*. Since the vampire has died and in Pater's words "learned the secrets of the grave," vampire stories also offer readers an opportunity to confront their own fear of the dead. Possibly such stories help readers come to terms with their own mortality, a considerable benefit.

A more certain lure into the vampire's *weltanschauung* lies in the power of guilt. A vampire in a sense bleeds those around him for his own sins. Undoubtedly, many readers feel a similar guilt: the guilt of a mortal who through weakness of character has become a vampire. Having to prey on other humans to survive would add to this

weight. Guilt is such a common part of being human that it is little wonder that some readers seem inextricably drawn into this fictional world.

Despite the deep appeal of this myth, I suspect that many people will continue to view vampires as merely a convenient device to cover up obvious holes in a plot – like putting plywood over a hole in the floorboard to hold your feet inside. The analysis of these enduring appeals, however, suggests that vampires, rather than a bane to serious literature, are in many ways a striking creation of the human imaginative faculty. The source of their appeal is difficult to see but like the vampire in the mirror (Stevenson 147), it is there nonetheless. Vampires enable us to indulge our deepest fears and desires without directly challenging the moral values against which they are balanced.

No creature of the night seems to excite the imagination in quite the same way.

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